

Reflections on the  
Life of Negroes in  
Newark, 1910-1916

**William M. Ashby**

AN ADDRESS DELIVERED TO THE  
*Frontiers Club, February 16, 1972*

Market Street from Broad St.

Newark, N. J.



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*Cover: William M. Ashby. Facing page, postcard views of Newark, circa 1910*

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2 | NEWARK HISTORY SOCIETY | WILLIAM M. ASHBY

# William M. Ashby

**William M. Ashby was a pioneering civil rights activist who lived in Newark from the 1910s to the 1980s.**

He was born in York County Virginia in 1889, one of thirteen children of William Button Ashby and Sally Gary Ashby. Both of his parents were descended from free-born, property-owning Blacks. Nonetheless, William Ashby and his family struggled to get by in the Jim Crow South, and as a child he witnessed a lynching in Newport News, Virginia.

In 1904 Ashby followed some of his family members north to New Jersey, where he worked in restaurants in Newark and Atlantic City to fund his education. In 1911 Ashby graduated from Lincoln University in Chester County, Pennsylvania and in 1916 he received a degree in social work from Yale University.

The Newark Urban League hired Ashby to be its first director in 1917, a time in which Newark's relatively small African American population was swelling with the Great Migration of Southern Blacks in search of better opportunities. Ashby worked tirelessly to end discrimination in housing and employment throughout New Jersey, and during World War I the New Jersey Department of Labor hired Ashby to recruit Black workers for the state's defense plants. William Ashby later worked for the Urban League in Springfield, Illinois and Elizabeth, New Jersey until his retirement in 1953.

Ashby remained active in the civil rights movement, serving on the New Jersey Advisory Committee to the U.S. Civil Rights Commission in 1960-61. His memoirs, *Tales Without Hate*, were published by the Newark Preservation and Landmarks Committee in 1980. It remains a unique and remarkable account of Black life in Newark over the course of the 20th century.

Ashby was married to Mary Arnold Ashby from 1914 until her death in 1988. Their only child, Kathryn, died in 1944. William Ashby died in 1991 at the age of 101.

William Ashby's "Reflections on the Life of Negroes in Newark, 1910-1916" was first delivered as a speech to the Newark Frontiers Club on February 16, 1972. Frontiers of America is an African American organization founded in 1936 to address social problems and advance civil rights. Its members are called "Yokefellows," a reference to the burden of work in service to others. Ashby's original handwritten text for his talk, edited here for clarity and continuity, is among his papers at the Newark Public Library.

Ashby's talk provides a vivid snapshot of the economic, social, and cultural life of Newark's African American community during the 1910s, just before that community was greatly enlarged and transformed by mass migration of Blacks from the American South.

# Mr. President and Yokefellows:

This is Negro History Week. Jim King asked me if I would talk to you tonight on the life of Negroes in decades past because he knew that for more than sixty years I have been associated with this city, sometimes in a very intimate manner. I suspect that some of you are wondering—and not without good reason—why I have chosen such a short time—six years, 1910-1916, to talk about us when the fact is that our ancestors have been citizens here for full three centuries. Well, I have what I believe to be a perfectly logical reason for restricting the time span. In fact, there are three reasons.

**ONE.** Until 1916 life among us was a rather staid, even, and unexciting thing. In three centuries we had developed a pattern of getting along, and it seemed to work well for us. There was little of going across the line and mixing with whites except in a condescending or patronizing manner. There were discriminations, prejudices, restrictions, prohibitions. These were sometimes a little deeper than being merely superficial. But they never penetrated themselves to the depth of "race hatred." We had an accommodating tolerance of one another.

**TWO.** For much of that period 1910-1916, I lived in Newark. It was the period between which I had graduated college at

Lincoln University, and before going off to Yale University for furthering my education. I was, I believe, the only young Negro at that time who had finished from a reputable college. Furthermore, I had a good job. I was a waiter in the W.B. Day Restaurant. These two things combined gave me a tremendous advantage. People deferred to me in manners of respect far in excess of what I deserved. But I was alert, and I observed all that was going on about me, much of it I am sure sank in very deep.

**THREE.** In 1916, life in Newark for everyone changed dramatically. The war in Europe was on. We would soon enter it. Newark, with its diversity of manufactories, was called upon to produce a vast variety of war materiel. Our factories needed new workers. Thousands of Negroes came to Newark to fill industrial needs. From that moment, this city has never ceased changing in race relations.

The census of 1910 gives 9475 as the Negro population of Newark. Where did they live? Negroes were scattered in large and small patches all over the oldest part of the city. Looking at a city map, one can easily identify the streets on which they lived. For instance, beginning in the Ironbound one would see patches.

ABOVE: Waverly Avenue at Somerset Street. This block, in Newark's old Third Ward, was one of the areas where Black Newarkers lived in the early 20th century; BELOW: Worthington Pump Company. This was one of the Newark factories that employed Black workers in the early 20th century.





1. Oliver, South, Thomas, Pennington,  
East Kinney, Chestnut.

2. Congress, Union, Prospect,  
New York Avenue.

3. The Island, Lockwood, Esther.

**Skipping across the railroad.**

4. Vanderpool, Miller, Emmett, Astor,  
Sherman, Brunswick.

5. Mulberry, Camp, Scott, Kinney, Elm,  
Cottage, Beach, Austin, Tichenor.

6. West Kinney, Halsey, Nevada, Beecher,  
Washington, Longworth, Crawford,  
Coe's Place, Marshall, Plane, Baldwin.

7. Shipman, Arlington, Augusta.

8. Quitman, Monmouth, Somerset,  
West, Barclay, Broome, Charlton, Prince,  
Spruce, Waverly, Boyd, Livingston,  
Morton, Kinney.

9. Norfolk, Rankin, Beacon, Richmond,  
Rutgers, Hampden Place, Bank,  
Howard, Wickliffe, Academy, Wilsey,  
Camden, Littleton, Fairmount.

10. Warren, Summit, Searing, Bank,  
Arch, Lock, Orleans, Colden, Hoyt.

11. Comes Alley, Pierson Place, Bank,  
Academy, Plane, Campbell Street.

13. Boyden, Sussex, Burnet.

14. Sheffield, Stengel, Summer, Crane,  
Division, Orange, James.

15. North 5th—North 6th.

ABOVE AND FACING PAGE: *Housing conditions for African Americans in the early 20th century.*

No Negroes lived in Forest Hill. There were none in Roseville, nor Vailsburg, nor Woodside. The Weequahic section as we now know it was Lyons Farms. It was literally a farm with at least two large dairies, and truck farming covering wide areas.

### How did they earn their living?

A safe guess would be that at least 80% of Negro wage earners were employed in domestic service. For women, the percentage would be even higher. They were cooks, waiters, butlers, valets, coachmen, laundresses, maids, chauffeurs. With but rare exceptions, all who worked in industry were just common laborers. They worked at the Flockart Foundry, Coe's Steel, Carnegie Steel, Benjamin Atha Steel, Worthington Pump, leather factories down on the Plank Road and along Frelinghuysen Avenue, Swifts Packing Co., Harrison. A few worked in the construction industry and were members of the Hod Carriers union. There were also two or three carpenters and a like number of brick masons. These unions admitted Negroes to membership. But steamfitters and plumbers, and also the electricians union denied membership to Negroes.

The following had the so-called "good jobs". All of them were messengers, janitors, or a combination of both.

- CORNELIUS BROWN and HALSEY FRANCISCO were in the City Hall.
- JACOB KING, Fireman's Insurance.
- ALBERT C. FLETCHER, perhaps the only male Negro who could operate a typewriter, was a real secretary to an insurance company head.
- JAMES F. KINNARD, National Newark Bank.
- HOWARD STAATS and EVERETT REEVES, Howard Bank.
- CHARLES BANKS, Fidelity Union.
- WILLIAM H. VAN BLAKE, American Insurance.
- CHARLES RUFFIN, JOHN P. O'FAKE, Mutual Benefit.
- ALLAN BLAND, SR., Essex County Republican Club.
- GEORGE JANIFER, McKinley School.
- CHARLES LANSING NEVIUS, North Ward Bank.



- JAMES MILLER was paymaster in the Water Department.
- JOSEPH H.E. SCOTLAND was the guardian of Mortgages in the Court House.
- WALTER DARREN was the business agent for the Teamster's House.

**In business, serving Negroes only:**

- REBECCA CLARK, grocery and vegetable store on Spruce Street.
- ANNIE DUNLAP, restaurant on Orange Street between Plane and High.
- JOHN MORYCK, a saloon on Academy Street. He lived on Kearney Street. Moryck had an unusual daughter, Brenda. She graduated from Barringer High School and won a scholarship at Wellesley College,

certainly the first Negro girl from Newark to attend a prestigious white school.

- There was the COOKS AND WAITERS CLUB on Lafayette Street.
- ALLAN BLAND JR. and ANNA E. WHITTINGTON were in real estate.
- BENJAMIN F. OGBURN had a little insurance company: Atlantic Mutual.
- REGINALD STEWART was the representative of a rather strong insurance company whose headquarters were in Washington: Home Benefit Association.
- MR. COLEMAN was the policeman. LOUIS A. SEARS and JOHN M. WILLIAMS were mail carriers. The widow of Mr. Williams is still alive.

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**NEW JERSEY'S LEADING  
Colored Undertaker  
BROWN**

Our Friends are COLORED.  
Our Ministers are COLORED.  
Members of Lodges that are COLORED.  
Members of Churches that are COLORED.  
Buried in COLORED sections of cemeteries.  
**WHY THEN SECURE the OTHER MAN to bury our loved ones?**

Charity should begin at HOME.  
If the other MAN would REFUSE you his service  
then your own would succeed.

**282 BANK STREET, NEWARK**

Phone Market 2616

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Advertisement for Anna E. Whittington's real estate business; Advertisement for Henry J. Brown's funeral business; Allan Bland, Sr., Building superintendent for Coleman Business College and the Essex County Republican Club.



**There were some Negroes in business to which I want to especially call your attention. They competed with whites and succeeded.**

- For instance, there was C.M. BROWN the father of our John Brown. He had a stall in the Center Market. He sold chickens. So successful was he that he obtained the sobriquet "Chicken Brown."
- JOHN M. STOUTE had a printing shop on Academy Street.
- THEODORE RICHARDSON was a tailor who had a shop at 124 Clinton, just across the street from where we are at this moment. He made clothes for well to do whites.
- MARY and FRANK ANDERSON had a restaurant and hotel business at 315

Halsey Street. Her patrons were largely Firemen and Policemen. Two upper floors of her three-story brick building were rented to whites as lodgers.

- STEPHEN H. LITTLE had a tea and coffee business. With his horse and wagon, he served customers all over the county. ALICE C. LITTLE conducted a little store in the basement of their house on Cottage Street. She had a facial disfigurement, the skin twisted to the right, perhaps a minor stroke.
- CHARLES JOHNSON had a coal business on Congress Street.
- JOHN S. PINKMAN, Hampden Place; JOHN BOOTH, Thomas Street; and FLETCHER AND SONS, New York Avenue had very successful moving and storage businesses.

FROM LEFT: Masette Brooke Gregory, Secretary of the New Jersey Federation of Colored Women's Clubs and Vice President of the Newark NAACP. She was active in the women's suffrage movement; Brenda Morck, Graduate of Wellesley College, teacher and writer active in the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s.

- SAM HOLMES, Arch Street;
- HENRY BROOM, Norfolk Street;
- MR. MONROE, Waverly Avenue—these were painters and paper hangers.
  
- JOE WRIGHT, GRANT REEVES, and EMMETT THOMAS were caterers. Thomas was a most unusual man. He was totally illiterate, except in writing his name which was not legible. But his brain was phenomenal. He would go to the home of a fine lady to give an estimate on a party. Very handsome, the impression made was favorable. He took with him a pad and a half dozen pencils sticking from his coat pocket. As he talked with his prospective employer he would apparently write in the book. The fact was that all he did was to make straight marks. But when he left the whole party was in his head. The party was always executed in perfection.

### **The Professions.**

#### *Physicians:*

- DR. W.W. WOLFE,  
383 Mulberry Street;
- DR. JAMES A. WORMLEY,  
Marshall Street;
- DR. W.H. WASHINGTON,  
23 Orleans Street;
- DR. W. R. GRANGER,  
27 Wallace Place.

#### *Dentists:*

- DR. W. P. URLING,  
Market Street;
- W. KINNARD,  
Thirteenth Avenue;
- W. R. FORD,  
Broad Street, near Orange Street.

#### *Nurses:*

- EVA MULFORD,
- FLOSSIE VAN BLAKE,
- IDA LONG.

#### *Teachers:*

- MAE MULFORD,
- GRACE BAXTER,
- ADDIE GARRIS.

#### *Lawyers:*

- OLIVER RANDOLPH,
- GEORGE A. DOUGLAS,
- JOHN B. STANNARD,  
all had offices on Market Street,  
near Broad Street.

#### *Undertakers:*

- HENRY J. BROWN,  
Bank Street;
- DAVID D. WOODY,  
Plane Street.

### **Where they went to Church.**

*Begin in the Ironbound.*

#### *Mt. Zion Baptist:*

REV. JOHN R. BROWN, minister,  
located on Thomas Street.

*The A.M.E. Zion Church* was on Pennington Street. This is the oldest Negro congregation in Newark. Indeed, it is one of the oldest in the country, having been organized either late in the Eighteenth Century, certainly earlier in the Nineteenth Century. It is now known as the *Clinton Memorial A.M.E. Zion Church* and is on Broadway.

*Sr. James A.M.E. Church* was on Union Street. REV. COLLINS was its minister. Some of you remember his son, HARRY COLLINS who had a distinguished service in France in World War I. He served as an attendant in the Judges Chambers in the Court House until his recent death.

*Right. Bethany Baptist Church, Bank Street between Boston and Wickliffe Streets. Founded in 1871.*

158 Ross EPA





*The Thirteenth Avenue Presbyterian Church* was on Thirteenth Avenue and Boston Street. Its minister was REV. E. F. EGGLESTON. He had a son, Frank, who was a schoolmate of mine at Lincoln University.

*St. Philip's Episcopal Church* was on High Street, near Bleeker Street. REV. ROBERT D. BROWN was its minister.

Another very old congregation was *St. John's M. E. Church*; it was on Academy Street, not a few hundred feet or so above Plane Street. Its minister was REV. WATERS. He had a son, Paul, who also was a schoolmate of mine at Lincoln.

*Israel Memorial A.M.E. Church* was on Kinney Street, between Prince and Broome. *Bethany Baptist Church* was on Bank Street. REV. R.D. WYNNE was the pastor.

*Mt. Olivet Baptist Church* was on Eighth Avenue. REV. W. W. FLEMING was the preacher. He was the most cooperative minister with whom I ever worked in my many years as an Urban League Director.

There was a small congregation, *Bethsaida Baptist Church* on Stone Street, as I remember it.

*Left: Thirteenth Avenue Presbyterian Church near Boston Street: Founded on Plane Street in 1835. In 1910 the congregation moved to this church which had been built in 1889.*

### In Newark, Negroes had a distinct cultural life.

Certainly, its most distinguished feature was the Sunday Afternoon Lyceum. The meetings were held on Sunday afternoon. They moved from one church to another. The leader of this cultural group was ALBERT C. FLETCHER. There was vocal music, both groups and individuals. There were recitations from poets.

Always someone recited from Paul Lawrence Dunbar. His "The Party" was a favorite. AMOREL O'KELLY COOKE, the mother of SALLY COOKE, read one of her latest compositions. On occasions, a Negro with a wide reputation, invariably a minister or an educator would be the guest speaker. The favorite instrumentalist was CLARA SCUDDER. She was a marvel on the piano. Indeed, she had been recognized as a child prodigy and was taken when quite young to England to perform for royalty.

There was also "Madam Johnson's" Annual Recital of her pupils. She lived on Washington Street, near William Street. MINNIE JOHNSON taught music and had many pupils. Each spring she paraded her pupils to an eager and waiting audience in concert.

We had a newspaper. I seem to remember its name as the *Newark Herald*. It pretty well told us about all the things that were going on among us. Its editor and publisher was JAMES E. SADLER. He lived in Montclair but the office of the paper was on Bank Street. His wife, BERTHA SADLER, held office. She was a very attractive lady. Though very dark, her profile was Asiatic rather than African. She was lithe, tall and a figure that kept one's eyes on her.



### How we amused ourselves.

In summer, there were Hillside Park in Belleville and Dreamland Park down on Frelinghuysen Avenue. If Negroes were admitted to Dreamland at all, the entrance fee was double that of whites. We did go freely to Hollywood Park in Maplewood and to the Velodrome on South Orange Avenue. Also, there were trotting races at Waverly Park, and boating on the lake in Weequahic Park.

Summer's biggest event was the excursion to Bellewood Park in Hunterdon County. We went on the Lehigh Valley Railroad. There was a joke which said that on the day of this excursion not a chicken could be bought in Newark for the picnickers had purchased them all for feasts around the crude tables in the park.

In winter there was Proctor's Theatre. We were always told to go to the balcony. Few went to Miner's. Few went to the Court or Blaney's. But the real events were the dances given by ALICE MCDONALD and her Orchestra. There wasn't a ragtime musician in the county who was better than Alice McDonald. The dances were held in the Auditorium on Orange Street

near Broad. Another great winter attraction was the Annual Ball of the Knights of Pythias.

If we ate away from home we could go only to Waldorf's on Market Street, near Broad; to Grant's Lunch, a one-story building on the corner of Plane and Market Streets; a Greek luncheon on Market Street between Washington and Plane Streets. ALETHIA JEFFERSON, a tall and robust woman who loud-mouthed into everyone's business, had a cook shop on Washington Street, near Court Street.

### We had our clubs and organizations.

There was the *Owl Club*. These were young men in sports. Our own JAMES FULTZ was a member. They had a cracker-jack basketball team.

There were the *Elks*, *Knights of Pythias*, *Masons*.

An unique literary club was the *Phillis Wheatley Literary Club*. Organized in 1910, it is still a very alive organization. MUSSETTE GREGORY was the founder. With her were ARMITA DOUGLAS, JENNIE BROWN, MARY GRANGER, and PAULINE BAXTER.

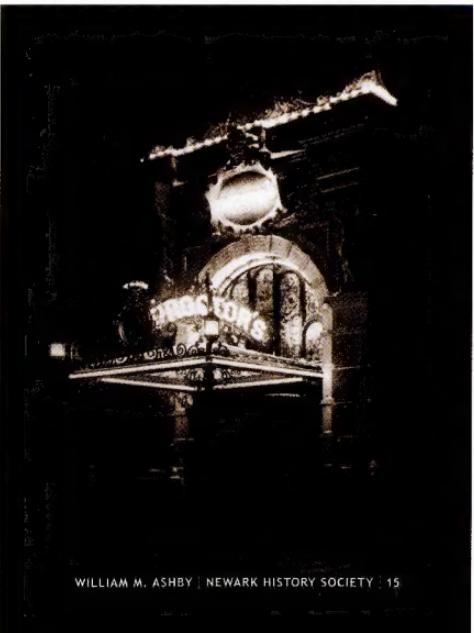
There was the *Saturday Night Men's Club*. I remember LOUIS A. SEARS, JAMES MILLER, JOHN H. WILLIAMS, EMMETT THOMAS, JOHN STOUT, and LANSING NEVIUS.

There were the FAN-TANS. This was the high society expression among Negroes in North Jersey. An invitation to the exclusive closed dance given annually by the Fan-Tans was positive proof that one's social status among us was assured. The women in the Club were beautiful—very beautiful—all of them. SUSIE TRAVIS, BERTHA COTTON, LIBBY ALEXANDER, BESSIE WOLFE, LOTTIE COOPER, BELLE SHEARER, ABBY NEVIUS, EMMA WORMSLEY, GRACE BAXTER, LILLIAN JOHNSON.

We had our politicians. What were contemptuously called "little peanut politicians" were numerous. They, like ants in spring, came out making noise just before an election, and disappeared the

night the last ballot was cast. But there were others who played it as a way of life. ASA GIBSON, ALLAN BLAND SR., JOHN T. CHESHIRE. Cheshire was an odd one. Always impeccably dressed, he wore a wing collar with an ascot tie, his kid leather shoes shining as if lacquered. No one ever knew him to do one day's work. Yet, he always had a dollar. He lived with BETTY LIGHTFOOT on New Street. There were all sorts of rumors about that.

I have given you a rather accurate picture of what life was among us up until 1916. It is time that we disillusioned our youth of a fancy which they accept as fact. They superiorly boast that all the changes in Negro life for the better began only yesterday with them. It is a sad and erroneous illusion. If the house we now occupy is strong, it is because the people I have described to you laid a foundation of solid rock.



FACING PAGE: Bellewood Park. Located in western New Jersey and operated by the Lehigh Valley Railroad. It was a popular summer excursion destination for Black Newarkers in the early 1900s.  
LEFT: Proctor's Theater, 116 Market Street. Ashby cites Proctor's as one of the few Newark theaters that admitted African Americans, though Black patrons were relegated to segregated seating in the balcony.

# Recalling Bill Ashby

I first met Bill Ashby in the 1950s when we were both members of the service club, Frontiers of America. We also shared the same alma mater, Lincoln University in Pennsylvania.

In the last quarter-century of his life, Bill and I enjoyed a father-son relationship, and in his very last years, I spent weekends visiting him at the Brookhaven Nursing Home in East Orange, NJ. A man of style and grace, he dressed in a shirt and tie even during his nursing home days.

Bill was known as a civil rights leader who fought for the advancement of all people through his work in the Urban League, but he was also a passionate writer. He wrote in longhand, on yellow legal pads. He also kept journals, where he chronicled his thoughts, ranging from letters to the editor to a review of his favorite music group—Peter, Paul and Mary. If something made his journal, that meant he felt passionately about it. I remember one entry, on the occasion of his 75th wedding anniversary, when he wrote that he and his wife, Mary, had been married 75 years, three months and two hours. To me, that was incredible.

I read a lot of his journals. He wrote letters to everyone, and very often he made copies of the letters and put them in the journal. Some were comical, like the time he tried to cancel a subscription to a magazine but still had copies showing up in his mailbox. So he kept writing, getting more and more agitated with each

letter. They were all in the journal. It was funny to me that he would do that.

Bill was a voracious reader and a believer in the daily newspaper. In a sense, it was his bible, especially *The New York Times* on Sunday. The modest, one-bedroom apartment he shared with his wife on West Market Street in Newark was filled with literature. It annoyed him—and he found it very frustrating—when he began losing his sight and then could no longer read. I used to read to him quite a bit in the nursing home.

Bill and Mary Ashby loved dining out with friends at two of his favorite restaurants—Thomm's on Park Avenue in Newark, and The Manor in West Orange. He smoked one cigarette a day, after dinner. He'd go outside and light up a Pall Mall and just puff it, but never inhaling. He did that even in the nursing home.

In 1986, Bill and I returned to Lincoln to celebrate his 75th class reunion. He was honored with the Outstanding Alumnus Award and five years later, the President's Medal.

I will always remember Bill's determination and his commitment to life. I recall him telling me when in his 80s, "Walt, I will live to see 100 years." He lived to be 101.

**Walter D. Chambers** was born and raised in Newark. He is a 1952 graduate of Lincoln University. He worked in Newark City Hall as assistant executive director of the Mayor's Commission on Group Relations and later as an executive at New Jersey Bell and Bell Atlantic.

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In Newark - 1910 - 1916 - Feb. 16-1972

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Mrs. President and Yokesfellows.

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